
Reviews

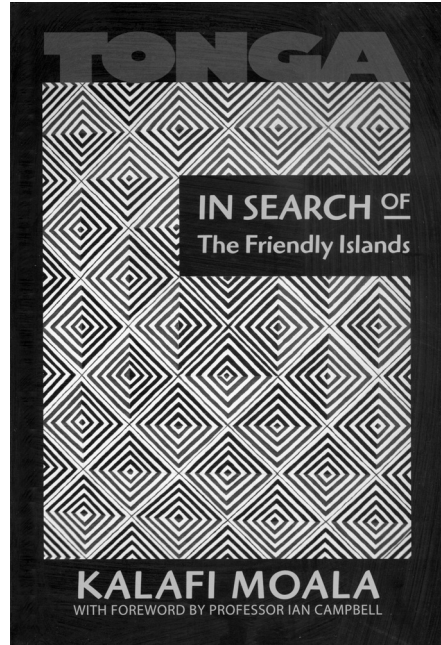
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Master storyteller's challenging vision

In Search of the Friendly Islands, by Kalafi Moala. Hawai'i: Pasifika Foundation Press, and Auckland, NZ: Pacific Media Centre (AUT University), 2009, 148 pp. ISBN 978-1-877314-75-9.

KALAFI MOALA is no stranger to confrontation. He spent 26 days in prison for contempt of Parliament in 1996, along with MP 'Akilisi Pohiva and fellow journalist Filo 'Akau'ola. The ruling was later overturned as "unconstitutional", but this didn't stop the government from systematically banning his newspaper, *Taimi 'o Tonga*, from the kingdom—twice.

Before that, the *Taimi* team had suffered numerous raids, arrests and threats at the hands of the authorities.



Things have changed since these landmark crackdowns on media freedom—Moala has now taken over the government-owned *Chronicle* as one of his projects—but as his new book proves, the man still has an uncompromising propensity to 'tell it like it is'.

In Search of the Friendly Islands, his sophomore publication, is sure to make waves—and not only with the governing authorities. It is a jolting dose of realism for any Tongan.

The title addresses Moala's scepticism with the myth of a perpetually serene and culturally idolised 'Friendly Islands'. Instead, the Tonga he portrays is a problematic site of contested

power, tangled by the influences of modernisation and globalisation.

In less than 150 pages, the book probes the gross contradictions found in Tongan culture—chronic violence, elitism, and religious hypocrisy, among others, interweaving historical accounts, philosophical reflections, and political analysis with lucid real-life stories. It's what Moala calls the 'Pacific mode of story-telling'.

He argues that the traditional Tongan culture is rooted deep in a system of domination and oppression. But importantly, more than just politics, it involves the power of 'men over women, parents over children, aristocrats over peasants, nobles over commoners, teachers over students, priests and ministers over laity, and rulers over people' (p. 31). It is how Tongans relate to the world.

This ideology of domination-oppression has inspired the violence common in both Tongan history (the 'Dark Ages' of bloody civil war) and today's communities. The very first pages vividly recount actual stories of such cultural brutality.

'Social conditioning' drives it home, and from a very young age, a Tongan child will learn that there is a pecking order, and everyone knows their place.

Yet, in a grim twist, Moala spends a chapter discussing how the

'oppressed became the oppressor' during the notorious 16/11 riot of 2006 that destroyed 80 percent of the capital's business district and left eight people dead. A long-time champion of reform, he explicitly denounces members of the current democratic party, as well as the foreign press who persist in portraying them as *the* voice of the people.

'Parachute journalists' ignore all the knotty facets in Tonga's political movements—break-away parties, factions and turncoats—let alone understand the role of culture.

However, any Tongan is vulnerable to moral corruption and self-interest, and Moala follows with many an amusing anecdote that show the ambiguity of Tongans towards certain 'Christian' or 'traditional' fundamentals. For instance, forms of 'trickery' or deceit are often condoned—if you can get away with it.

Meanwhile, Chinese immigrants are heavily discriminated against precisely because they are stereotyped as 'cunning'. Ironically still, at the macro-level, Tongans rely on huge injections of aid from the Chinese government, in a relationship that will likely be permanent.

Moala continues to probe Tongan politics and society and the last three chapters of the book deal with the hefty issues of culture, social structure

and spirituality. His challenge is to approach reform at a deeper level of ideology and psyche.

The key problem is not the lack of seats for People's Representatives in Parliament, but the mentality that had normalised this system for years—one steeped in a culture of domination and oppression, and still very much around.

For Kalafi, political reform can only fully come about with cultural reform, and it can only be successful through soul-searching at a spiritual level.

In Search of the Friendly Islands is a courageous book with an essentially positive message—one that heralds change. It will likely garner some disapproval because it is so candid (as professor Ian Campbell speculates in his foreword—'many Tongans will be embarrassed by what Kalafi has to tell them').

Who would be proud of 'the incompetence of Tongan clergy and community leaders' to deal with domestic violence (p. 25), or child-rearing habits that yield 'Tongan kids [who] do not argue; they just attack each other' (p. 28)?

However, Moala's clever style is not to simply state his opinions as truth. A master storyteller, he provides personal stories and incidents well-known in the community, and asks,

'well don't you see it too?'

It takes a degree of guts to bring one's own views to the public forum, and invite debate and much-needed dialogue.

After all, what Moala sees as 'deceit' among Tongans, others may see as resourcefulness—a resistance to the moral regime; what he sees as political self-ambition, others may see as vital radicalism; and while much of his descriptions appear to be about Tongans 'in general', others may wish to avoid generalisations about any culture. There are always pockets of resistance to any status quo—Moala himself represents one of them.

He rightly points out that 'culture is not God Almighty' (p. 111). One will always find contradictions as old becomes new, young becomes old, ideas are borrowed while others are lost.

The challenge for modern Tongan culture is how our people can adapt to these changes in a way that is safe, productive and constructive for every one. There are questions to ponder together—what traditions should be kept and what can be done away with? Should Tonga immediately 'cut and paste' a foreign model of democracy? How can leaders effectively convey changes to the masses?

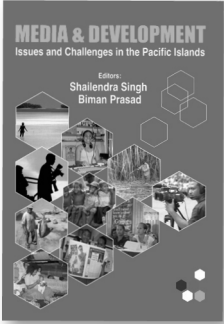
As a Tongan, reading this book was wholly engrossing—but not

because I agree with everything Moala writes. The most important contribution of this book is that it encourages the reader to look beneath the surface, inviting different interpretations and reactions that will hopefully result in dialogue.

The issues—moral, cultural, political—are apparent in any society faced with globalisation and development. However, people need to be encouraged to question why things are the way they are and whether there are different solutions.

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